DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 434 353 CS 216 912

AUTHOR Brown, Randel D.; Fjelstad, Per Even Tor
TITLE Writing Back to Writers: Inter-Institutional Collaboration and Preliminary Research on the Value of Substantive Response in Writing Instruction.
PUB DATE 1999-04-12
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at Texas Education Association/Texas A&M University System Partnership for Texas Public Schools Richardson Fellows for School-University Collaboration Spring Conference.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; *College School Cooperation; Elementary Secondary Education; Fellowships; Higher Education; Program Descriptions; Public Schools; Reflective Teaching; Research Proposals; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Response Meaningfulness; Texas A and M University

ABSTRACT

This paper records two different professors' thoughts and experiences as recipients of fellowships for school-university collaboration. The first recipient, after hearing about program models in education, is changing how he thinks about education and the possible mission of the university. In the paper, he explains that the collaborative project sought to promote attention in classrooms to the practices of responding to writing, both at those times when teachers respond to student work and when students respond to each other's work. Activities and discussions were planned that would immerse interested teachers in practices of substantive response and allow them collectively to compare the effectiveness of strategies for applying the practices of substantive response. According to the paper, each professor was emboldened to experiment with new approaches to teaching. The second professor uses an "open letter" to his colleagues to describe in narrative form his feelings about teaching and how the fellowship has given him the opportunity to let some other people into the private space of teaching. A research proposal for research on professorial responses to student writing (with Dora Flores) is appended, as is an update on the project. (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 434 353

Writing Back to Writers: Inter-Institutional Collaboration and Preliminary Research on the Value of Substantive Response in Writing Instruction

Paper presented at

Texas Education Association/Texas A&M University System

Partnership for Texas Public Schools

Richardson Fellows for School-University Collaboration

Spring Conference

submitted by

Dr. Randel D. Brown & Dr. Per Even Tor Fjelstad

4/12/99

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS 216 912

Inter-Institutional Collaboration and Preliminary Research on the Value of Substantive Response in Writing Instruction

Per Fjelstad
Assistant Professor of Speech
Texas A&M International University

It has been a privilege to work alongside associates from the Texas A&M University System in developing partnerships with public schools. I have been inspired by the various approaches colleagues are taking in developing connections between their own work and that of nearby public schools. At one institution, for example, a distance learning arrangement is being tested for promoting teacher aides into classroom teachers. The program taps a human resource long overlooked. At another institution parents are being welcomed into and taught methods for encouraging their children to read. This program too develops a powerful educational resource (parental attention), mostly underutilized for lack of learning environments for parents in this matter. At yet another site health experts are experimenting in bringing dental hygiene messages to elementary schools. This program models how other areas of technical or environmental expertise might be presented efficiently to public school audiences. These three examples are only those with which I have become most familiar. I know that by talking with other colleagues, even at the upcoming meeting, I will hear and start thinking about more models and approaches.

In the long haul this experience will change how I think about education and the possible mission of the university. Already I am considering ways of combining scholarship and service in ways that are not, in my experience, immediately conceivable for beginning--or continuing--university professors. Being a Sid W. Richardson Fellow has helped me see such possibilities.

The fellowship I received also has assisted me in thinking about the pragmatics of the project we undertook here in Laredo. We sought to promote attention in classrooms to the practices of responding to writing, both a those times when teachers respond to student work and when students respond to each other's work. We began our project with the assumption that substantive response, that is, verbalized attention to the content and implications of what others have written, is significantly different from evaluative feedback. We planned activities and discussions that would

immerse interested teachers in practices of substantive response and allow us collectively to compare the effectiveness of strategies for applying the practices of substantive response. We saw ourselves as teacher researchers collaborating throughout the year in order to understand the possibilities and limitations of substantive response as a means for motivating and improving student writing.

We also found in our monthly meetings something that we sensed was dramatically missing from our daily professional lives. For example, each month anew we were surprised at the delight it was simply to be talking about these things with colleagues. We marveled at discovering that we shared similar struggles at the different levels of teaching. We were struck by the general lack of opportunities within our home institutions to talk about the pragmatic and philosophical questions that we were able to talk about with each other. Thus, in the notebook we compiled during the year we documented a recurring exuberance and sense of challenge that we found at our meetings. We experienced a form of renewal by gathering regularly as researchers and as thinkers about the role of response in the teaching and learning of writing skills.

We also emboldened each other to experiment with new approaches to teaching. As a result of a newsletter article that we found, two members--myself included--tested the usefulness of student audio tapes as a medium and format for encouraging substantive response. Another member has involved all the students in her high school class in a research project into the means by which they, the students, understand the principles of grammatical correctness and error. A further member of the group has experimented with a floating classroom notebook as a context and catalyst for student response. Our regular meetings prompted us to try new things and to reflect on the outcomes of those experiments in ways that we probably otherwise never would have risked.

We also discussed how challenging the task is to theorize collectively about the pedagogical implications of substantive response. This challenge is not so much a sign that theory and theorizing were absent from our discussions--they were not--but rather that reaching agreement about theory was never our highest priority. The natural dynamic of our meetings centered around support, encouragement, and narration of experiences. There was no easy bridge to the function of verifying causal or phenomenological theories. For a similar reason, I believe, our conversations did not naturally tend toward cataloging or listing suggestions for other teachers to follow. We never saw ourselves as experts, somehow. We were instead fellow experimenters, excited in each

other's company by the promise of what we were trying--and sometimes succeeding--to do.

Perhaps there is another imaginable version or stage of this project, one which would put a greater premium on the testing of hypotheses and the validating of suggestions. Such a project would fascinate me, too. It would change the structure of our discussions, I imagine, if we felt the need (and had the resources) to generalize our experiences and verify our theories of learning. We might, for example, perceive a growing need to present our findings to the world. In other words, our experiences this last year have prompted us to ask why such a conception of the project represents a new level of challenge, and more specifically how that challenge too could eventually be taken on. We look forward to talking with you about these thoughts at the upcoming meeting.

An open letter to my fellow Richardson Fellows:

Randel D. Brown
Assistant Professor of Special Education
Texas A&M International University

I have been contemplating taking on the challenge of getting a tattoo. My daughter assures me this is the "In Thing" to do, even for a person of my advanced age. My problem is that I haven't decided for sure the subject of my body art (tattoo), but I'm leaning towards PopEye because of his philosophy of life. His motto has marked me from childhood. As you probably remember, he would say "I am what I am" (pronounced "I yam what I yam"). This statement was both an affirmation to himself and a proclamation to the world. To himself it said "I accept what I am" and to the world it said "accept me for what I am". More subtly stated is his gentle acceptance that his life has meaning. The PopEye comic books were published until about 1978, I've read most of them. In every issue PopEye had a clear benevolent purpose, a self imposed sense of importance. "I gots ter rescue Swee'pea! Lucky I alweez brings spinich fer emerjensees." There's no self doubt there and no insecurity. This appears to be significant to me because I want to embrace who I am and maybe I'm afraid that others will reject me if they really know what makes me ME. This is especially true for me in the area of teaching. Teaching and classrooms have been the one constant during my life. I have not been away from the classroom for longer than the months of summer for the past 35 years. I can almost breath and eat chalk as my only

sustenance. In many ways teaching is what I live for, it's what I do and it's who I am.

The chair of my department mentioned to me the other day that she would like to attend my class during the next week or so. At first I was concerned. Maybe she had heard something bad about my teaching. And then I thought perhaps she has heard something good and just wants to see it for herself. Either way, I felt a little bit apprehensive. Why? I'm relatively confident about my abilities in the classroom. I've often invited her to come to class in the past.
I think the apprehension comes from the fact that teaching, by nature, is a lonely endeavor. It is a kind of self-imposed isolation from the rest of the world. It is the plight of the teacher to be the one individual who carries the responsibility to create that magical environment where learning takes place. And while others are involved in the process, it is the teacher who accepts the weight of the burden. This is probably the reason for my apprehension. Allowing someone else into my classroom makes me feel like I'm willing to let them get closer to me, willing to let them intercede for me and willing to let them see me as I am.

I've been thinking a lot about this the past few days and I can't seem to find any resolution to my situation. I was aware of this last Tuesday when I attempted to help an acquaintance with a problem and was faced with the realization that not everyone wants to be my friend or wants to have my assistance. It reminded me of something that happened a few years ago. Albrey and Jessi (two oldest children) had gone out of town for the weekend and Taylor, Cadie (two youngest children) and I were left to fend for ourselves. We kind of liked this, by the way, it gave us a chance to do some things we wouldn't have done otherwise. On Friday night we did the appropriate thing and went to see "Jurrasic Park". It was a bit violent, but we all liked it. The realistic dinosaurs were quite fascinating and scary. Several days later I was making my daily one hour trek from work to home down Highway 51 when I spotted a grand old box turtle attempting to navigate his way to the far side of the road. Remembering the fact that those large reptiles I saw in the movie are now extinct I dutifully stopped to assist this smaller cousin cross the road to prevent his premature demise. When I picked him up I was so entranced by his obvious maturity (Judging by the rings on his shell he was about 30-40 years old.) I took him home to show Taylor.

The trip home was interesting to say the least. I assumed that within a few minutes we would be fast friends or at a minimum we would tolerate each others presence. This was not the case. This turtle made such a nuisance of himself, crawling all over the car, hissing and leaving

his evidence everywhere he wandered, that I finally had to admit defeat and turn him safely loose in a pasture several miles from my house.

I spent the remainder of the trip contemplating the plight of th- turtle. I decided that it was his loss not to have me as a friend and benefactor. He was in such apparent danger when we met, yet he didn't appreciate nor desire my intervention into his life. I believe he surely would have died without my aid. I didn't take into account the fact that he had already spent his 40 some odd years navigating his own crossings without my assistance and the fact that turtles by nature do not take friends. They spend their life in seclusion, without family or friends, utterly alone. And yet they appear to prosper and live relative long lives. To satisfy my need for self-perceived importance I decided that this may be the very reason why dinosaurs are now extinct. Had I been present to help them cross the road we may still be enjoying their company to this day.

As a teacher it is so easy to adopt the attitude of turtles. It is easy to isolate myself and refuse the company and support of others who share my goals. Being a part of the Sid Richardson Fellowship has given me the opportunity to let some other people into that private space of teaching. What a release it is to share with other teachers the successes, failures, trials, joys, and accomplishments of the classroom. There are so many answers that come up in simple conversations and interactions with my Sid Richardson colleagues and friends. I am thankful for the opportunity to count them as my friends and benefactors. So, the real point to this story is that I pray I will never again adopt the attitude of turtles. My friends and colleagues are more important to me than anything. And I am sure that without their intervention I would have long ago become an extinct teacher.

When they make this story into a movie I will take on t- role of the crotchety old turtle blindly, ignorantly attempting to cross the highway and my Sid Richardson friends will be the kind motorist who take the time to stop and assist me along my perilous journey.

YOUR THANKFUL FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE

RANDEL BROWN

Appendix A

TEA/TAMUS

Partnership for Texas Public Schools

Richardson Fellows for School-University Collaboration

Research Proposal

"Writing Back to Writers"

submitted by

Dr. Per Even Tor Fjelstad, Dr. Randel D. Brown & Dora Flores

3/16/98

I. Purpose

How do we currently determine the practical value of our responses to student writing? In one sense, how do we keep on giving it? What is the basis for our belief that our response practices lead to student improvement and learning? Stated differently, what stories do we tell that strengthen (and/or weaken) our beliefs that what we do works?

Why is this important? If we wish to make the university and our school classrooms places where students become reflective and serious writers, we need to strengthen support networks for teachers who are learning to model such practices in their classrooms. This workshop series will explore the connection between collegial support and the understandings teachers have of their response practices.

II. Principal Research Questions

1. What is the nature of the responses utilized by professors and teachers when responding to student written assignments?
2. What types of responses are necessary to create an environment where students become reflective and serious writers?
3. How can teachers in their interactions with students effectively model practices of collaborative reading?
4. What are the major environmental influences by virtue of which students increasingly respond to each other's writing in ways that promote critical reflection and thoughtful revision?
5. What are the barriers to implementing strategies that create an environment where students become reflective and serious writers?

III. Methodology

We will be organizing a workshop and discussion series, "Writing Back to Writers." The structure of the activities will be as follows:

1. Participants will begin their reflection by reading and responding to the article:

   Sperling, M. & Freedman, S. W. (1987).

   A Good Girl Writes Like a Good Girl.

   Written Communication, Vol. 4, No. 4: 343-369.

2. Participants will come to the next session prepared to discuss the reading. They also will bring a draft of a story, taken from personal experience, that illustrates what works (or doesn't) in their current strategies for responding to writing.
3. Participants will bring to the following sessions samples of papers: papers that were a pleasure to respond to and, contrastingly, papers that were a challenge (or headache).
4. All participants will practice writing responses to these samples, an activity which should open up discussion about the nature of this art.
5. We will conclude the series by collaboratively designing lessons and response strategies by which teachers model the practice for students; and
6. Conclusions about teaching strategies, lesson plans, and reflective stories will be presented in a written format and on the "Writing Back to Writers" home page that will linked to the Texas A&M International University home page.

IV. Research Population and Human Subjects Information

1. Participants in is this study will be instructors of writing from the local school districts in Laredo, Texas.
2. In addition, instructors from Texas A&M International University and The Laredo Community College will be invited to participate.
3. Writing samples will be drawn from the teaching environment of the workshop participants.

V. Timeline

1. The workshops meeting will be scheduled over a 10 month period of time corresponding to the academic calendar.
2. Initial meetings will began during the spring '98 semester.

3. Workshop session will be scheduled monthly during the spring 98 semester and the fall 98 semester.

4. Conclusions, lesson plans and response strategies will be collected and reported by February of 1999.

VII. Budget

The budget for this project is outlined below.

* Honorarium for the principal investigators (3@ $1000)	$3000.00
* Travel to System-wide professional development activities	$1900.00
* Teacher Incentives (12@ $300)	$3600.00
* Maintenance and Operation	$1000.00
Total	$9500.00

Travel to System wide meetings

* Travel for the three principal investigators to the syviem meetings.

Maintenance and Operation

* Photocopying for workshop materials, lesson plans and research reports.
* Mailing cost for communication with workshop participants.
* Office supplies-paper, printer cartridges and various office supplies.
* Home page set-up and maintenance.

Teacher Incentives

* 12 teachers @ $300.00 for each teacher.

VIII. Investigators

1. Per Fjelstad,

   Assistant Professor of Speech, Texas A&M International University & Teaching Consultant, South Texas Writing Project

2. Randel D. Brown,

   Assistant Professor of Special Education, Texas A&M International University & Research Partner, South Texas Writing Project

3. Dora Flores,

   Teacher of writing at Nixon High School and Co-Director of the South Texas Writing Project

Appendix B

TEA/TAMUS

Partnership for Texas Public Schools

Richardson Fellows for School-University Collaboration

Fall 1998 Update

Writing Back to Writers

In Laredo, Texas, a growing group of teachers is working on the project Writing Back to Writers. The group now consists of three university professors, one community college instructor, one high school teacher, one middle school teacher, and three elementary school teachers. We are investigating the value and meaning, for students and teachers, of interpretive response to written work.

In preparation for the workshops and discussions to be held this coming fall, the founding members of the group have done the following:

* Met several (5) times.
* Started a project notebook that presently contains:
  the grant proposal, agendas and notes from the meetings, sections profiling the preliminary writings and research of project participants, a bibliography of work on interpretive response, selected articles and article reviews
* Launched a (starter) Web-page mirroring some of the contributions collected in the project notebook.
* Reported the group's preliminary investigations to the Fellows of the 1998 Summer Institute (of the South Texas Writing Project).
* Recruited five new participants for the project: three elementary school teachers, one middle school teacher, and one university professor.
* Continued informal discussions as to how we each might conduct research in our classrooms and apply the emerging findings to our teaching.